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MR. NICHOLAS BIDDLE AND THE ARCHITECTURE
OF GIRARD COLLEGE.

[The diary of the late Mr. Nicholas Biddle gives an interesting account of the reasons which led to the adoption of the plan of a Greek temple for the main or central building of the Girard College. Mr. Biddle was the President of the Board of Trustees, upon whom devolved the responsibility of selecting a plan for this main building. Two things are remarkable concerning the plan which he advocated: first, that he succeeded in giving to Philadelphia one of the noblest architectural monuments of modern times; and, secondly, that he was able to do this in face of violent opposition on the part of his fellow-trustees and of the public, gradually gaining their sympathy by the force of his single will, and at last making them proud that this pure and beautiful work of classic art had been reproduced as the chief ornament of their city.]

In his address at the laying of the corner-stone of the College, in 1833, Mr. Biddle echoed in words singularly beautiful and forceful the heart-felt wishes and hopes of all who heard him. "Long may this structure stand," said he, "in its majestic simplicity, the pride and admiration of our latest posterity; long may it continue to yield its annual harvests of educated moral citizens to adorn and defend our country. Long may each successive age enjoy its still increasing benefits, when time shall have filled its halls with the memory of the mighty dead who have been reared within them, and shed over its outward beauty the mellowing hues of a thousand years of renown."

January 9 1839.—Went to the meeting of the Trustees of the Girard College of which I am president, but we wanted one of a quorum (the requisite number being 10), and no business was done—I begin as a bad journalist, for instead of this day, it was last Wednesday that we met. But I take this occasion to put down a few remembrances about the

College. Mr. Girard left by his will two millions of dollars to found a college for orphans, with a reserved fund to be employed if necessary, for the same purpose amounting to I suppose at least as much more. Mr. Girard was I believe a very undisguised infidel in religion, and he ordered in his Will that no clergyman should ever be permitted even to visit the College. This exclusion naturally excited the ill will of religious persons who inferred from this exclusion that the College was to become a mere seminary of infidelity and immorality, and the whole project was in the worst possible odor throughout the community. For a long time after his death, I had never read his Will, but having at last done so, it appeared to me that an institution in the heart of Philadelphia destined, of course, to form the character of the youth was either for good or evil to be an immense power, and that therefore all good citizens should be interested in preventing the perversion of such an instrument to mischievous purposes. This I said everywhere, till at length, being asked if I would take a share in the management, I consented. After Mr. Girard's death the Select and Common Councils of the city to whom he had bequeathed the management of this trust were composed of persons of less liberal sentiments, and less capacity for such a trust, than could be desired, being of the party in politics, in which number, rather than character and talent predominated. That party had already made some arrangements which were not of good augury for the College—but before any thing permanent was effected a change of parties placed another body called the Whigs in power and these being personally more intelligent & respectable, endeavored to secure a good administration of their trust. For this purpose—in order to place the College out of the reach of the political changes of party dominion, they appointed a body of Trustees each to serve for three years, but renewable every year by an infusion of a certain number of fresh members. I was one & was placed by courtesy at the head of the list, & on the organization of the Board I was elected President.

Our first business was to erect the College; a matter of much delicacy & difficulty. The Councils had offered a premium for the best plan and the premium was awarded to a young architect by the name of Thomas U. Walter. They next elected the Architect, and Mr. Walter was again the successful candidate. There then was an Architect appointed & his plan approved, and the danger was that this plan might be adopted. I say the *danger*, Mr. Walter was the son of a bricklayer & had begun life by working with his father—at a later period he studied architecture with Mr. Strickland, and succeeded to the post of architect against his old master, by a majority of (I believe) one vote. His plan was for a large, showy building, wanting simplicity & purity, but not ill adapted to please others as it had already pleased the Councils. As however, the Board of Trustees was appointed to form a plan of instruction, it was naturally thought that the structure should conform to the mode of instruction to be carried out in it, and therefore a committee consisting of four members of each Council, was appointed to confer with the Architect, and an equal number of the Trustees to determine upon the plan of the building. The choice of the Council devolved on me as the Presiding officer and I accordingly selected those whom I thought most liberal in their views & best qualified for such a task. The Committee consisted of the following gentlemen.

Of the Select Council.	Of the Common Council.	Trustees.
JOSHUA LIPPINCOTT	JOHN GILDER	N. BIDDLE
JOHN R. NEFF	SAM ^L . V. MERRICK	RICHARDS, B. W.
DENNIS M ^C CREEDY	JOHN BYERLY	M ^C ILVAINE, JOS.
JOSEPH WORRELL	EPHRAIM HAINES	JOHN STEELE
		W ^M . M. MEREDITH
		THOS. M ^C EUEEN
		THOS. DUNLAP
		RICHARD PRICE.

Of the Committee of Trustees I was the chairman. When the Eight Trustees met the eight Councilmen, I was

the chairman of the joint meeting. After much discussion, a sub-committee of this joint meeting was appointed, I again named the sub-committee, consisting of Messrs. Lippincott, Neff & Merriek of the Councils, Messrs. Richards, McEuen, & Price of the Trustees,—I being added on special motion.

Of that sub-committee I was again Chairman.

The question was now brought within a narrow circle.

The first difficulty was to wean Mr. Walter from his plan,—to which the natural self-love of a young artist, of course, attached him, and I endeavored, while doing justice to the merits of his plan, to excite his ambition to achieve something beyond his plan or the plan of any one else, in short to take advantage of this rare opportunity of immortalizing himself by a perfect, chaste specimen of Grecian architecture. He was inclined to listen from confidence in me and he had worked at the Bank of the United States where I was Chairman of the Building Committee. He behaved perfectly well about it, no one could have done better. He renounced his own plan and came at once into my views, and prepared all the necessary drawings and seconded me with great cordiality.

We then had to work upwards thro' the Committees, and, first, of our sub-committee.

Our first omens were very unpromising. The plan seemed so foreign to all the colleges & poorhouses known that it startled the members—But by dint of perseverance and persuasion, we succeeded in making converts gradually. The sub-committee had several meetings in which I could discern that with the kindest wishes to myself personally, there was a desire to escape from the responsibility of a thing so new. Mr. Walter the architect has since told me that several of them said to him—We do not like to oppose Mr. Biddle but cannot you help us to get these ideas of Greek architecture out of his head,—and accordingly he made plans & estimates for them to persuade me out of this plan—My excellent friend Mr. Lippincott of the sub-committee was particularly opposed to it and said “it would never do.” I

note down his name because after the thing was actually decided upon, he was among the most zealous of all for the plan, and wished to have even more columns than the plan to which he strongly objected. The debateable ground was the flank colonade. At length one day we had a drawing made to see how it would look with the steps of the portico continued round the flank as far as the *Cella*, or main body of the building. This tempted them round a little, and taking advantage of their coming a part of the way round, I pressed the matter, and obtained a unanimous vote of the sub-committee in favor of the present plan.

We then called a meeting of the General Committee which was held in the Hall of Independence on the 23rd of April 1833 all the members present except Messrs. Merrick & Gilder. There we had the subject again examined, and the argument maintained chiefly between myself & Mr. Jos. Worrell, one of the representatives from the Select Council. He was violently opposed to the plan—argued against it with great warmth, and being a retired carpenter seemed to have a right to talk about buildings. But he & I had served together as Senators at Harrisburg & I knew how to treat his peculiar & intractable temper better than the rest of the Committee. The discussion was closed by a resolution offered by Mr. Joseph McIlvaine, that the report, [a verbal one of explanation with the drawings] be accepted and the same committee be continued with instructions to prepare a report to Councils to accompany the designs for the College, with an estimate of the probable cost. This is said to have been adopted unanimously but Mr. Worrell did not yield his opinion though he may not have persevered in voting against it.

The next day a meeting of the Board of Trustees took place, April 24 1833 when the plans were submitted to them and approved and “earnestly recommended to the Select & Common Councils for their ratification.”

The next day, April 25 1833, the Joint Committee met in the Hall of Independence, when the sub-committee reported the plans & estimates as directed by the resolution of the

Joint Committee on the 23rd April, with the vote of approval passed yesterday by the Board of Trustees. Whereupon on motion of Thos Dunlap it was unanimously resolved,

“That the report of the sub-Committee & the plans, submitted by them be approved and that the Chairman of the committee be directed to transmit to the Select & Common Councils the said report & plans with the estimate of the Architect and the aforesaid resolution of the Board of Trustees of the Girard College for orphans.”

The ordinance of Councils of March 21 1833 was as follows “That the Building Com. [four from each Council] together with an equal number from the Board of Trustees of the G. C. for orphans, & the Architect of the College, shall, as soon as practicable, determine upon a plan for the said College building or buildings, and that when the said plan shall have been duly arranged by the aforesaid building Com., Com. of Trustees & Architect, it shall be reported to the Select & Common Councils & if the same shall be approved of by them, the said College Building or buildings shall be erected agreeably thereto.”

The first election of Trustees on the 11th of Feb. 1833 was as follows

One Year.	Two Years.	Three Years.
N. BIDDLE	B. W. RICHARDS	JOHN M. KEAGY
G. B. WOOD	THOS. DUNLAP	WM. M. MEREDITH
THOS. M ^C EUEEN	CHAS. BIRD	ALGERNON S. ROBERTS
WM. H. KEATING	JOS. M ^C ILVAINE	JOHN STEELE
RICHARD PRICE	GEO. W. TOLAND	JOHN C. STOCKER.

The Board consisted of these with JOHN SWIFT the Mayor,
JOSEPH R. INGERSOLL, Prest. Select Council
HENRY TROTH, Prest. Com. Council.

On the 18th of Feby. we had our first meeting. Present 16 members all of the above fifteen members, with the exception of Mr. Keating & Mr. Toland who were at Harris-

burg as members of the Legislature. Mr. Swift, the Mayor, attended *ex officio*.

The meeting was organized by calling Mr. Swift to the Chair & Mr. Price was made Secretary. They then proceeded to ballot for a President, and out of the 16, one was for Mr. Troth, which I had given, one for Mr. B. W. Richards and the other 14 for me.

At the close of the year, my term having expired, I was reelected for 3 years, the Trustees for 1834 being (Feb. 10 1834)

For One Year.	For Two Years.	For Three Years.
B. W. RICHARDS	JOHN M. KEAGY	N. BIDDLE
THOS. DUNLAP	A. S. ROBERTS	G. B. WOOD
CHARLES BIRD	A. D. BACHE	THOS. M ^c EUEEN
JOSEPH M ^c ILVAINE	JAMES GOWEN	W. H. KEATING
G. W. TOLAND	H. J. WILLIAMS	S. V. MERRICK

with MR. SWIFT, the Mayor, MR. J. R. INGERSOLL & MR. TROTH Presidents of the Councils.

Special meeting at the Hall of Independence called by order of the President April 24 1833, present Messrs. Biddle, Troth, Wood, M^cEuen, Price, Richards, Dunlap, Bird, Toland, Roberts & Steele.

The plan reported by the Committee appointed on the 27th of March last was submitted and explained by the Prest. whereupon on motion of Mr. Dunlap it was

“Resolved,

“That the plan of the Girard College reported by the joint Committee & now exhibited to this Board, & which this Board has had the opportunity of examining, be earnestly recommended to the Select & Common Councils for their ratification.”